

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE VISION OF HEAVEN: 4:1--5:14

From the seven churches on earth, John switches to the heavenlies. This pattern of switching back and forth between earth and heaven is not unusual in apocalyptic literature. Spiritual guides (angels) frequently comment on the “behind the curtain” scenes as they take the reader from the visible world into the invisible one. Further, as is indicated here, the vision features not only a tour of the heavenlies, it also features an invitation to explore the future, “...what must take place after this” (4:1b).

The vision of heaven has a single theme: the God of creation is also the God of redemption, and his redemptive work is accomplished through the death of Jesus who was crucified. Whatever the turbulence on earth, it does not disrupt the heavenlies, and worship in heaven is perpetually ongoing. Indeed, the relationship between earth and heaven is such that everything on earth will ultimately be reconciled to the rule of heaven. The central focus of these chapters is upon the five hymns of praise that build into a crescendo in the following order:

1. Praise to *God* who is eternal (4:8)
2. Praise to *God* who is the Creator (4:11)
3. Praise to *the Lamb* who is the Redeemer (5:9-10)
4. Praise to *the Lamb* who was slain (5:12)
5. Praise to *the Lamb* and to God forever (5:13)

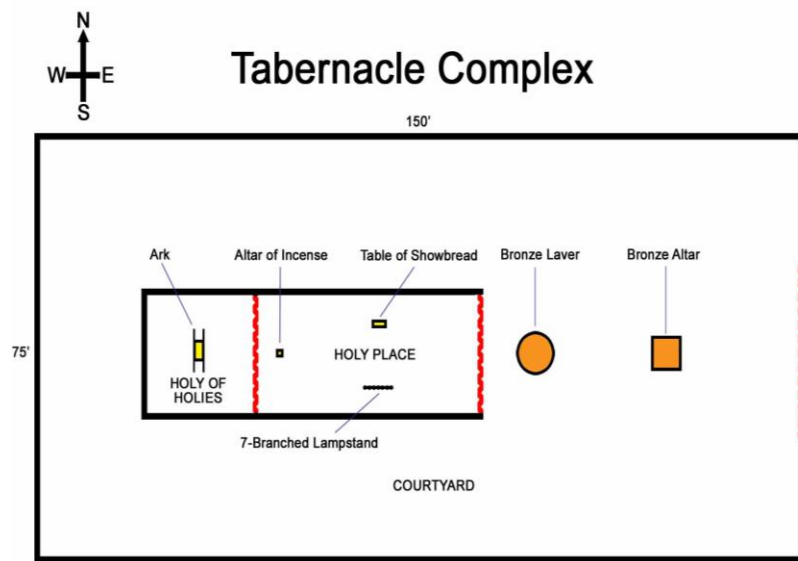
The Throne of God (4:1-11)

There are some similarities in the way John describes the throne of God and the way in which Ezekiel describes it. Both mention the four living creatures (Eze. 1:5-24), and Ezekiel specifically calls them cherubim (10:15).¹ Both refer to the dazzling character of God’s throne and the rainbow-like brilliance surrounding it (Eze. 1:26-28). Poetic descriptions like these are in the tradition of Hebrew poetry.

Similarly, the trisagion “Holy, Holy, Holy” in Isaiah’s vision of the heavenlies (Isa. 6:3) is repeated here in John’s vision (4:8). John seems to draw from both these Old Testament visions without a precise replication of either.

Elements from the ancient tabernacle and the 1st Temple also seem apparent in John’s vision of the heavenly sanctuary. The divine throne parallels the ark of the covenant, where Yahweh was “enthroned” between the cherubim (cf. 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kg. 19:15; 1 Chr. 13:6; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16). In the various descriptions of the heavenlies, there is an ark (11:19), candelabrum (1:12), an incense altar (5:8b; 8:3-5), a laver or sea (4:6; cf. 1 Chr. 18:8; 2 Chr. 4:2-10), and an altar (6:9; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). These implements go back to Moses’ trip to the top of Mt. Sinai, where he saw a pattern for worship which he was to follow in constructing the ancient tabernacle (Ex. 25:9, 40).

¹ In Christian tradition, the four cherubim in Ezekiel and the Revelation, depicted as a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle, were symbolically associated with the four canonical gospels going back at least as far as Jerome. Matthew is the winged human, Mark the winged lion, Luke the winged ox, and John the winged eagle.



DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Inasmuch as earthly things are visible while heavenly things invisible, how hard is it for modern humans to accept the idea that there is a reality that is not available to the natural senses?*
- *What is the significance of the oxymoron that the Lion is the Lamb or that both the figure of God and also the Lamb are simultaneously on the throne?*
- *What might be the significance of the elders casting their crowns before the divine throne?*

The Elders

The elders possibly represent a superior order of angels, much as does the similar reference in Isaiah (24:23). There is probably a deliberate priestly inference drawn here from the memory of the 24 priestly orders organized by David (1 Chr. 24:4; 25:9-31). At the same time, the elders are royal figures in some sense, since they are seated on thrones and wear golden wreath-crowns. An alternative interpretation is that they symbolically represent the people of God, perhaps in terms of the twelve apostles of the Lamb and the twelve tribes of Israel, both brought together later in the book (21:12-14). Earlier, God's people are described as a "kingdom of priests" (1:6). In whatever way they are to be understood, they perform the priestly function of offering the prayers of God's people as incense (5:8). Also, it is to be noted that if they represent God's people, they should not be equated with any particular persons, since they seem to distinguish themselves from those who are redeemed.² As such, they might be representative angels who stand for the tribes of Israel and the church's apostles.

The Worshipping Community in Heaven

The doxology in John's vision of a continually worshipping community in heaven accords both with Isaiah's vision and Ezekiel's vision, mentioned earlier. It is from here that John has drawn his triple "Holy, holy, holy," a doxology that is traditionally associated with praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and such an interpretation is implied if not explicit.

DOXOLOGY

The word "doxology" derives from two Greek words, δόξα (= glory) and λόγος (= word), hence, "word of glory." Idiomatically, a doxology is a praise to God, usually with reference to the Holy Trinity.

² The KJV rendering of 5:9, which employs the 1st person plural pronoun, "...thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God," is based on a variant Greek text which most scholars consider defective. Much to be preferred is the NIV "...you purchased men for God..." and this reading is followed by virtually every English version subsequent to the KJV.

DISCUSSION POINTS

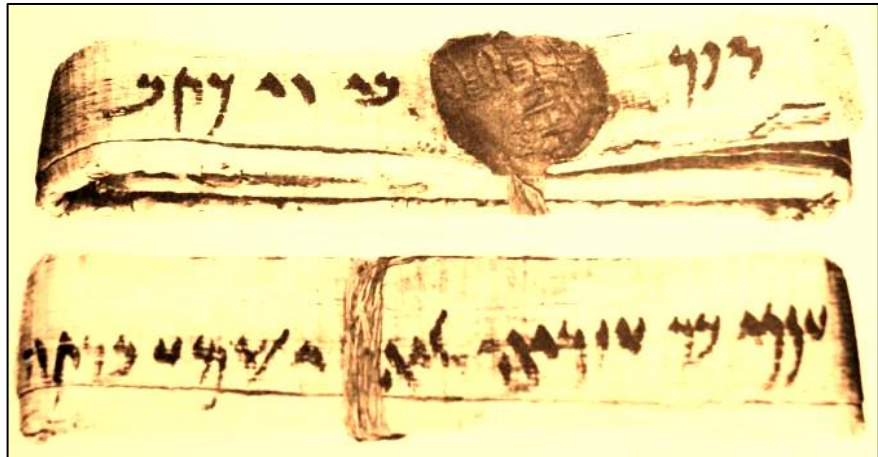
- *How has John's vision of the heavenly liturgy affected the forms of worship throughout Christian history?*
- *What are the advantages of liturgical worship? What might be the disadvantages?*

The Seven Sealed Scroll (5:1-14)

In the hand of God John saw a seven-sealed scroll. The fact that it was a scroll and not a “book” is important inasmuch as, unlike a book, a scroll could not be opened until the last seal was broken. The scroll was an opisthograph, that is, a scroll written on both sides. Such a document goes back to the Mesopotamian practice of inscribing a sealed contract-deed in which the deed itself was written on the inside, while a brief description of the contents was written on the outside. John's description recalls a similar scroll which contained words of lament, mourning and woe (Eze. 2:9-10). It also recalls the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase which Jeremiah deposited in a clay jar after buying property from his nephew (Jer. 32:6-14). It would seem, then, that the seven-sealed scroll represents a title deed, presumably the title deed of the world or perhaps a title deed to God's people. God intends to reclaim what is rightly his as the final act of his redemptive plan, and this includes not only the final redemption of his own people but also the judgment and overthrow of evil (cf. 11:15). This is the goal of history as embodied in our Lord's prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”



This seven-sealed scroll, discovered near Jericho, was tied with seven cords, each sealed with its own bulla (Israel Department of Antiquities).



This opisthograph, a double-deed written both within and on the outside, has a sealed text, a permanent legal description, and an open text of an abstract available for inspection (Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York).

The Lamb Prevails to Open the Scroll

John apparently understood well the significance of the scroll, for he was grieved that no one could open its seals. However, he was informed that the Lion of Judah had triumphed. The redemptive ability of Jesus Christ to open the scroll rested, as in ancient times, on his qualifications. He was both

REDEMPTION LAWS

The language in 5:9 that the Lamb had “purchased men for God” derives from Old Testament redemption laws, which is a release from legal obligation closely linked with the payment of a redemption price (Lv. 25:23-55). The fact that the Lamb was “worthy” to open the seven-sealed scroll suggests his qualifications as a kinsman-redeemer (cf. Ru. 4:1-12). The purchase price, in this case, was Christ’s death.

willing and able, and he was a close relative who was descended from Judah and David. Most important, he was the Redeemer of the people of God.

The Lion and the Lamb

The two striking images of the Lion and the Lamb are significant. The Lion imagery comes from Jacob’s ancient prophecy of Judah (Ge. 49:9-10), and it points toward kingship. The Root of David allusion points toward Christ as the fulfillment of the restoration of David’s fallen dynasty (Isa. 11:1; cf. Am. 9:11; Ac. 15:13-18).

The Lamb imagery derives from the Exodus motif mentioned in the introduction, which is to say, Jesus is the Passover Lamb whose blood protects his people from the judgments about to fall upon the world (cf. Ex. 12:7, 13, 21-

23. The Lamb had already conquered (through the cross and resurrection), and he was ready to consummate his work in reclaiming the world.

The Character of the Lamb

The description of the Lamb suggests several things. First, it is pictured with its throat cut, an image pointing back to the cross (cf. 1 Pe. 1:18-19). Second, it has seven eyes and seven horns. The number seven symbolizes fullness, and the seven eyes represent the seven-fold Spirit of God, which is to say, the fullness of God’s Spirit, and as such, there is an identity between the Lamb and the Holy Spirit (Zec. 4:10b; cf. 2 Co. 3:17). Furthermore, the Lamb is said to stand “in the center of the throne,” and there is an identity between the Lamb and God himself. The imagery of the horn is a frequent Old Testament symbol for strength (cf. Dt. 33:17; Ps. 18:2; 112:9; 1 Ki. 22:11; Zec. 1:18-21; Lk. 1:69). The fact that the Lamb has seven horns indicates his complete and full strength.

Universal Praise

The closing of the heavenly tour describes the “new song” of the 24 elders (cf. Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1). They are joined in this anthem by the angelic hosts, the four living creatures, and all creatures in heaven and earth, extolling the Lamb. Again, there is implicit numerical symbolism in the seven words of acclamation (5:12) and four words of praise (5:13).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Why would it be important that the redemption of the earth also contains powerful acts of judgment?*
- *How is this similar to the exodus from Egypt, the great redemptive event of the Old Testament?*
- *Can you see why it is important to New Testament theology to see the patterns of redemption God instituted for his ancient people?*